

The Clipper Visits...Barbara McClosky



By MARTHA HIMES

Thanks to a Vassar College music teacher, Norman Vincent Peale's organist, her husband, and a lot of talent, Barbara McClosky has had a broad career spanning the Broadway stage to the McClosky Institute of Voice.

Music has always been her foundation. She began piano lessons at the age of four and a half. "I think it was self-defense on the part of my family, because apparently I got up and pounded away on the keyboard," McClosky said.

Despite her love for music, when she entered Vassar College, she intended to major in French. However, one of Vassar's music teachers collared McClosky one day and led her over to the music department, "and that was the end of the French," McClosky said. She promptly changed her major to music, specializing in piano.

Although she was interested in taking singing lessons, McClosky was at first unimpressed by Vassar's vocal instruction. But then David Blair McClosky arrived on campus, filling in for a professor on sabbatical. When she heard his voice and experienced the quality of his singing lessons, she decided to study voice, from an instructor who would one day become her husband.

Those voice lessons paid off when she moved to New York after her graduation in 1938. Through a chance meeting, she got a job singing in Norman Vincent Peale's choir. "I was looking for some music, and this man came and sat next to me," McClosky said. "It turned out that he was the organist for Dr. Peale's church. I said something about singing, and the next thing I knew, he said, 'Why don't you join my choir?' I said, 'Don't you think you ought to hear me first?'" The two got on the subway and went to Dr. Peale's church, where McClosky successfully auditioned.

That same organist started her theater career. He mentioned to the young singer that the Paper Mill Playhouse, a New Jersey summer theater, was auditioning. She was accepted and performed there

through the summer. When the Paper Mill Playhouse closed for the season, she joined Cole Porter's Broadway musical "Mexican Hayride," in which she performed for several years. "That show was the most sold out show on Broadway at the time," McClosky said.

All the while, she had remained in touch with David Blair McClosky, who had joined the Air Force. In 1944, she took the weekend off from "Mexican Hayride," and the two married. She remained on Broadway until "Blair" was discharged from the service in 1945.

The couple then moved to Syracuse, where Blair taught at Syracuse University. Thanks to his reputation as a singer, he was almost immediately booked to perform.

However, a respiratory illness requiring nine months' hospitalization had severely debilitated his vocal cords. Advised by his doctor that he would be unable to sing, Blair decided to try to cure himself using vocal exercises. After 10 days, he returned to his doctor, who gave him a clean bill of health. Impressed, the doctor began to send patients to Blair.

Word of Blair's successful voice therapy got out, and when he and Barbara moved to the Duxbury area in 1952, he was asked to run a voice therapy clinic at the Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary. At the same time he taught at Boston University and Barbara taught at Bradford College and the University of Lowell.

Barbara learned Blair's voice therapy techniques, and over time, took over the Mass Eye and Ear clinic.

"People think singing is easy. When they see a very good singer onstage, they see nothing happening in the upper chest, because it's all happening in the abdomen, when the breath pushes out the abdominal wall. No one looks at your stomach when you're singing, and if your chest is calm, it looks like you're not doing anything. Of course, you're probably going to go out and have a five-course pasta dinner afterward. You

lose weight."

Blair's voice therapy was so renowned that in 1960, he was asked to join John F. Kennedy on the campaign trail, after the Presidential candidate lost his voice. Barbara joined Blair on about three campaign trips, and visited the Kennedys frequently in Hyannisport. "It was quite a household. Jackie would be coming downstairs to go to the beach, and Bobby would run United Nations races with the kids in the neighborhood." Barbara's car at the time, a Peugeot, was an object of curiosity for Jack Kennedy. He had never seen one and made a special trip outside to look it over.

In the summer, the McCloskys ran the Plymouth Rock Center for Music and Drama, first in Kingston and Plymouth, and later in Duxbury. "We had singing and dancing and recitals, chamber music, an orchestra, and we

were the first people to present 'Amahl and the Night Visitors' on stage, not on television," McClosky said. "Our Amahl was a girl from Syracuse University....Menotti (the composer) heard about this, and I understand he was not one bit pleased. It's supposed to be a boy."

McClosky, whose husband died in 1988, now teaches private voice lessons, both at her studio in Boston and at her home in Duxbury. Her low, measured and resonant voice bears witness to her years of vocal training, and a grand piano still occupies a prominent corner of her living room.

She is also active in voice therapy, primarily through the McClosky Institute for Voice. The McClosky Institute runs a two-year, summer course in voice therapy, as well as seminars in Boston, Seattle and Atlanta. "I'm so happy, we have

some very capable and interested young people who want to go on with this," McClosky said.

In the summer, McClosky volunteers for the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society as a docent, showing the Gershom Bradford House on Tremont Street. "I love that house. I always hope people will go there first, then to the King Caesar House," she explained. "It's so interesting, because Gershom Bradford sailed ships, and his brother-in-law Ezra Weston built them."

When asked if she was thinking of retiring, the 84 year old McClosky answered with a resounding "No!" She credits others with starting her in her many careers, but even Norman Vincent Peale's organist must have recognized that Barbara McClosky would not step away from a challenge.